

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #14
July 2020

from
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"There came a day at summer's full..." Emily Dickinson

Although Emily Dickinson refers to the summer solstice (“summer’s full”) In her famous poem “There came a day at summer’s full ...” and conjures up the almost mystical beauty and euphoria that many people associate with it, the reader soon realizes that she is writing about a relationship with a lover, most likely human (although she was a loner,) but certainly possessing the quality of the divine.

If you have been blessed by having had such a relationship, the experience only reinforces the magnificence of the symbol – the peak of summer – and every year I find that I abandon myself, at least in an interior way, to both the symbol and the feeling – one of pure liberation and joy. Every day of spring has been leading to this one! In the Canadian climate, the huge physical and symbolic difference between the winter solstice and the summer solstice adds to the enormity of release and jubilation. So, I’m beginning this letter with the preceding image, because it’s a personal expression of how the fullness of summer feels to me.

In these long languorous days I frequently find myself simply wandering with my camera, making a photograph here, another there, occasionally being arrested by a scene or situation for a half hour or more and, in keeping with my relaxed mood, swinging between purely documentary images and others that evoke summer more by my approach to the content than the visual material itself.

When I began to prepare this letter for all of you I decided to wander with the same randomness through images I’ve made in the areas around my house during summers past. To join my meandering click on [SUMMER](#) and afterwards you can join me on the front deck for a glass of wine, a beer, coffee, tea, or a tall, cold glass of Shampers’ Bluff A+ rated water straight from Earth herself.

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“Deep summer is when laziness finds respectability.” *Sam Keen*
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I’m very aware that my friends in South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia are now experiencing winter. How one experiences a season is relative to what one knows, so for me winter in most areas of these countries, is more like the mid to late autumn I’m accustomed to in Canada. It seems basically a breeze to me! In South Africa I’ve encountered snow several times, usually gone in a day depending on the altitude, not something one endures for months on end. However, I’ve actually felt colder in South Africa than in Canada because so many homes are not built to retain heat, but usually what feels like a freezing morning turns out to be a fairly warm day. Basically, I found that putting on warm clothes and then discarding them as the day warms up is all you need to do most of the time.

Many areas of South Africa and Australia have summer to worry about, not winter, and Australia's recent summer was an horrendous experience with bush fires raging for weeks in many parts of the country. In both countries the heat and often the humidity can trap you indoors like the cold does in a Canadian winter. On the other hand, New Zealand has little to complain about weather-wise, as it has one of the most consistently temperate climates on the planet. Mark Twain quipped that he wanted to go to Heaven for the climate and to Hell for the company. Well, I'll happily go to New Zealand for both the climate and the company!

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Summer often produces dramatic cloud formations and sudden storms. I have a front row seat for these, as my "now famous" front deck faces almost due west, the direction from which most appear as they move east. This storm blew up suddenly just as I'd finished pouring a Sauvignon for a friend.



Several of my friends have endured or are enduring major storms this spring and summer – horrible persistent suffering and profound grieving – and the last few months have been difficult for many. Talking with one friend who has suffered intensely, I was amazed by her courage and her compassion. Times like these can be great teachers and, sometimes, those who are hurting the most are the greatest beacons of hope and positive change. Their light shines through the storm.

We Grieve Because We Love

I will always remember the night in the month of my sixth birthday when my mother, having tucked me into bed and kissed me good night, walked into the adjoining bedroom and, seconds later screamed, “My baby, my baby!” My younger sister, Judy, just seven months’ old, had died in her crib. Her funeral was held in our farmhouse “parlour” three days later and my mother returned to her work of maintaining a large household of extended family and farm workers. Nobody talked about Judy’s death, perhaps didn’t know how, so day after endless day, my mother had only the kitchen stove and sink to witness her grieving. I do not know how she survived the event and its protracted aftermath emotionally, but years later she said to me “Time is a great healer.”

Because we humans are profoundly social creatures, we find it extremely difficult to accept the death of a baby, a young child, and a young adult. We always feel that they have been cheated. It’s especially heart-wrenching for their mothers and fathers, who recover from the loss slowly and only to varying degrees.

We grieve because we love. Because we are so incredibly fortunate to be able to love, we know that sooner or later, in one way or another, we will experience devastating loss.

Although we recognize that some animals show strong evidence of experiencing loss – dogs, elephants, whales are examples – eventually they seem to accept their changed reality and get on with their lives more easily than humans. But what about plants, which are as much living creatures as you and I? We assume we know the answer to this question, but perhaps we really don’t.

In The Hidden Life of Trees Peter Wohlleben describes how “Much like human families, tree parents live together with their children, communicate with them, and support them as they grow, sharing nutrients with those who are sick or struggling and creating an ecosystem that mitigates the impact of extremes of heat and cold for the whole group. As a result of such interactions, trees in a family or community are protected and can live to be very old. In contrast, solitary trees, like street kids, have a tough time of it and in most cases die much earlier than those in a group.”

Every time I enter the forests of Shampers Bluff, I am quickly embraced by the strong sense of community. Everything is working. The overall community and the range of smaller communities within it are functioning effectively. The rotting bodies of trees, old and young, that have toppled have become multi-level nurseries and daycares for lichens, fungi, and new generations of trees, all of which provide food and shelter for a huge range of animal life. But also, here in the forest, the hare dies so the fox can live. The pileated woodpecker pecks away for insects in rotting trees. Death and life are everywhere, all intertwined. The one is the precursor of the other. That’s how Creation works.

Paul Abella, Dept. of Philosophy at Acadia University, wrote recently “...*the [Covid-19] pandemic should serve as a poignant reminder [that] in honesty, nature is a blind, mindless slaughterhouse.*” Personally, I’m not sure I agree with Abella’s use of the word “mindless,” because the capacity to love among humans seems to have developed as part of the evolutionary process of expanding consciousness. Did it pre-date people or even exist on the planet 100,000 years ago?

Do we humans really want to be spared the creative process? If not, then we have to recognize that loss is inevitable and our own demise is also an act of giving. Although it’s difficult for us to acknowledge that, in nature, the death of a young person is like the death of a sapling or a fawn, we understand that it’s difficult because we love. And so we grieve!

However, it’s possible for us to find solace, peace, and even joy in knowing that each of us is fully a participant in the great on-going process of Creation. Or perhaps more accurately, that we are not so much participants in Creation as we are like water in a stream, simply the flow of Creation itself, have always been, and always will be. *fp*

In his remarkable book, The Universal Christ, Richard Rohr writes about Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit priest who trained as a paleontologist and geologist and believed that love is the very physical structure of the Universe. He says that for Teilhard “gravity, atomic bonding, orbits, cycles, photosynthesis, ecosystems, force fields, electromagnetic fields, sexuality, human friendship, animal instinct, and evolution all reveal an energy that is attracting all things and beings to one another in a movement toward ever greater complexity and diversity – and yet ironically also toward unification at ever deeper levels.” This energy is quite simply *love under many different forms*. (Rohr adds: “You can use other words, if they work better for you.)

Then, speaking for himself, Rohr writes, “Love, which might be called the attraction of all things toward all things, is a universal language and underlying energy that keeps sowing despite our best efforts to resist it. It is so simple that it is hard to teach in words, yet we all know it when we see it. After all, there is not a Native, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Islamic, or Christian way of living. There is not a Methodist or Lutheran or Orthodox way of running a soup kitchen. There is not a gay or straight way of being faithful, nor a Black or Caucasian way of hoping. We all know positive flow when we see it, and we all know resistance and coldness when we feel it. All the rest are mere labels.”



“The only way to retain love is to give it away.”

Elbert Hubbard

Many of you know that I spend much of May and all of June in my rhododendron and azalea garden, which now contains well over 1400 plants (very young to mature) spread through three acres of open woodland. The season is actually a long one, as the first blooms appear in the last week of April or the first week of May and the last blossoms drop their petals about the middle of August. The big show, however, comes during June, which is special from start to finish, and is the reason why I may be days or weeks behind in answering mail and may be difficult to reach by phone. (I very deliberately do not carry a mobile phone with me into the garden, but have Call Display on my land line.)

Most mornings I go into the garden with my camera shortly after five o'clock and lose myself in the incredible beauty of fresh, dewy blossoms for hours before the call of coffee and food rings loudly enough for me to hear. As every gardener and most photographers know, on a clear morning the earlier you can visit a garden, the better, as the soft light produces a rich rendition of colours without washed-out highlights and black shadows. Then, the first rays of sunlight provide stunning spotlighting and backlighting, but after an hour the harsher sunlight reduces the visual effect. Foggy days are invariably good and overcast sky is always an advantage for both viewing and photographing. Evening light may provide soft, warm light, though flowers are seldom as fresh as in the morning.

Certainly the worst possible time to visit and photograph a garden is a hot, sunny afternoon, especially if the wind is blowing. Visiting then is like sitting down to a delicious hot meal after it has gone cold. You may say to the cook "Oh, it still tastes good," but she/he knows what it did taste like and is fuming inside. You should always visit a garden at the time of day the gardener suggests or simply say that you are unable to accept the invitation. Gardens don't operate on human schedules.

Here are five visual examples of why I welcome visitors to my garden early in the day. I made the first four images while the sun was still skimming the tops of the trees and the birds were singing loudly. For the fifth image I used striking early morning backlighting.







Did you notice that that the first three images are photographs of a garden and the last two are pictures of flowers? It's an important distinction.

In the late 1980s I had the great privilege of photographing 35 of Canada's finest private gardens for the Penguin book, In A Canadian Garden. The authors, Hilary Weston and Nicky Eaton, had visited and/or researched 300 private gardens all across Canada and, when I was engaged to do the photography, they had "slimmed" the number down to 100. Then the two women, the editor David Kilgour, and I collectively decided on 35 for the book. You can imagine the discussions we had; the whole process was a learning experience *par excellence* in observation and seeing for me.

Before I set out on my several journeys back and forth across the country to photograph each garden at a good time, David gave me one very explicit instruction. "Remember," he said, "this is a book about gardens; it is not a book about flowers." In other words look for the overall visual sense of each garden and show important aspects of its design. Of course, I did make some close-up images of flowers as "accents" for the book layouts, but I soon realized the value of David's pointed advice and have heeded it ever since.

After my photographic immersion in Canadian gardens I became much more aware of how other people go about photographing gardens and soon noticed that a great many photographers can't see the garden for the flowers or, to use the common expression, "can't see the forest for the trees." As a result they make a lot of wonderful close-up and macro images, which in many cases they could have made at home, but have little or no good visual documentation of where they were.

Looking back even farther to my active camera club days (1960s and early 1970s), I recall that one of the most frequent comments made by persons evaluating or "judging" photographs was "You should have moved in closer." It took me years to realize that while this is sometimes good advice, very often a more useful comment may be "Back up, zoom wider, give us a sense of place."

Remember that it is a fundamental error to assume that by moving in closer you will simplify a composition, because the closer you come to your subject matter, the more you will magnify detail, and often end up with a composition that is more complex than the one you previously had.

However, several years ago I realized that, regardless of the size of the area being photographed, when a photographer is seeing well – that is, analysing the design of the subject matter, not just seeing the labels "tree," "face," "houses," etc. – he/she can deconstruct or see virtually every scene or situation as one to six shapes. It is rare indeed to find a thoughtful composition that exceeds that number.

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"Summer is the annual permission slip to be lazy. To do nothing and have it count for something. To lie in the grass and count the stars. To sit on a branch and study the clouds." *Regina Brett*

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"A perfect summer day is when the sun is shining, the breeze is blowing, the birds are singing, and the lawnmower is broken." *Janes Dent*

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Last week I used my little tractor-mower to create new walking paths through the extensive hillside fields below my house, because paths through fields or forests are always an invitation, an impetus to discover some unknown place, perhaps within oneself. Today, the first full day of summer, I followed some of these circuitous routes in the morning mist through the grasses, ferns, lupins (or lupines), and other flowers. At Shamber's Bluff spring always ends and summer always begins with hundreds of thousands of lupins streaming across meadows or gathering in ambiguous community groups around a boulder, a lone tree, or in a ditch.

I realize that not everybody who receives this letter responds to the botanical world in general and flowers in particular with the emotional depth that I do, but I hope these images will bring all of you pleasure. I also realize that many of you who live in the southern hemisphere associate flowers with seasons other than summer. In Namaqualand, for example, which has prolonged hot, dry summers, some plants bloom in late autumn, others in the relatively brief winter, but the huge burst comes in early spring.

I'd also like to tell you that, when I'm preparing this letter, I'm always thinking of this person or that – old friends and new and even of subscribers whose names I don't recognize and wonder about why they have subscribed. It's like paying you a visit, as writing and choosing images provide me the opportunity to share in slow, often reflective ways that make me feel I'm having an unhurried personal conversation with you, even though we aren't enjoying a martini, beer, wine, tea, coffee or whatever together on my front deck.

Bons souhaits tout le monde! Goeie wense almal! Good wishes everybody! FREEMAN

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